

Day of the Clowns

By Lila L. Pinord

“No, I don’t want to go!”

“You say that every year, Davey, but you know it’s no use fighting about it, don’t you?”

Irritation put an edge to his mother’s words. “The company picnic is important to your father and his job. How many times must we go over this?”

“But, but...” Davey Mansfield did know it was no use arguing, but felt he had to try anyway.

“No more ‘buts’, Son. Now, go to your room and get cleaned up for dinner. Dad will be here any moment.” With a relenting smile, Joan ruffled her nine-year-old son’s sandy brown hair and added, “I’ve fixed one of your favorites- spaghetti and meatballs. Ice cream for dessert! Now scoot!” She gave him a fake kick to his small backside.

Davey sulked his way to his room, at the top of the stairs. His was the only occupied room up there. The others were a small guestroom and an even smaller sewing-computer room. At times the boy felt all alone in the world, upstairs in his room, listening to night sounds that could be anything he imagined them to be. A spook walking up the darkened stairs, a goblin banging on water pipes, a vampire seeking some fresh blood. Or a clown -his biggest fear.

He hated clowns, feared them, and wished to stay as far away from them as possible. “Wish they would all go to Hell!” (Oops!) Davey covered his mouth as he knows he’s never supposed to curse, even though he figures that’s where they come from in the first place.

That’s why he always fought so hard to stay home on the Fourth of July, the day of his father’s company picnic at Tisdale Park, near the center of town. He couldn’t tell *anyone* of his

fears, the horror he felt in their presence, the deep-throated dread that washed over him at the very sight of them. He felt if he did tell, they'd all think he was looney, or something.

One year, panic so overcame him that he yelped and ran so fast, that his parents could hardly keep up with him. When they did, they dragged him back to the clowns – where he stood and squeezed his eyes shut so tightly, he'd almost blacked out. So that's how little Davey Mansfield got through the ordeal of the clowns that year.

It seemed like it was the same thing, every year and each time, his dread became stronger and stronger, until it began filling his nightmares and daymares, as well.

When school started in early September, he could keep busy enough so the thought of the clowns was forced to the back of his mind. At least until the next May and June. Now it was the dreaded “time of the clowns”, as he called it. Tomorrow... the Fourth of July - The Day of the Clowns!

Davey walked slowly to the window in his room, which over-looked the front part of the house and studied the homes across the way, deliberately avoiding the pale blue one. It was third house from the center, owned by the Canby family, where his best friend, Scoot Canby, once lived; until the clowns got him!

The first picnic that Davey could remember was when he was three-years old. He and Scoot were all excited about going to the park to eat hot dogs and watch the fireworks. Their parents were good friends, so they'd end up hanging out together. Davey whined until they allowed him to bring their dog, Slingshot. The dog loved to run and play in the park, just like the kids. After the boys played on the slide and swings, it was time to eat lunch, which they greatly enjoyed. An adult manned the giant-sized barbecue, grilled hot dogs and hamburgers, while others spread cloths on the long picnic tables and laid out the paper plates and utensils.

Of course, then everyone had to sit still while the *bigwigs* gave speeches about the company and how far it had come in the last twenty five years...

That's usually about the time when the children stopped listening and started fidgeting in their seats. Next, they'd attempt in vain to climb down from the wooden benches, while parents held onto them tightly by their collars. They certainly did their darndest to keep them still, which was always a losing battle.

Many ended up holding the kids on their laps, while some gave up and let them run wild.

Davey and Scoot were the lucky ones that ran wild, usually playing on the teeter-totter, until the "Big Cheeses" (that's what they heard parents say, referring to the bosses) got through speaking. Then they would head back to the tables and chow down on hot dogs, with mustard and ketchup running down their little chins, until their bellies were about to burst. "No fair!" they would complain, if they didn't have room left in their tummies for watermelon or cake.

The first time three-year old Davey saw the clowns, he was over-joyed. They appeared in the front of the annual Fourth of July Parade, riding on miniature cars and kiddies tricycles, and it was funnier than a "barrel full of monkeys," as his dad would say. The clowns were dressed in different colored outfits. Kids clapped uncontrollably as they jumped up and down, laughing as hard as they could.

There was only one really scary moment, that first year of the clowns for young Davey. One of the clowns, who dressed in white with red trimmings, pedaled his undersized bike very near the front row of children. He was so close that Davey could have reached out and touched his grinning face. As the front tire nearly ran over his little foot, he quickly pulled both feet back out of the way. His young mind figured it was part of the act anyway, so he grinned widely at this comical performer.

Suddenly, he felt as if an icy finger was traveling up his spine, as he gazed into the clown's eyes. Those eyes - they were *not* smiling. They appeared black and flat, without depth. Beneath the painted-on grin, his mouth wasn't smiling either.

Davey stepped back and buried his face in his mother's skirt, refusing to look at the clowns anymore that day. His mother hugged his head close with her gentle, angel's hands, as she continued her conversation with a friend who was standing next to them.

Davey waited until he was sure the clowns were out of sight, and then peeked out just in time to see a rusty, old, fire engine passing by. Then came a marching band, followed by a drill team. With his mouth agape, he began to enjoy himself again, watching the baton twirlers tossing their sparkly batons high in the air and then catching them. There were dogs pulling small carts with kittens in them, which completely erased any thoughts of the scary clowns from his young, impressionable mind.

Later at dusk, the crowd *oohed* and *aahed* at the fireworks display. When it was all over, Davey went home and right to bed, a very tired, but happy little boy.

The next morning, as a sleepy-eyed Davey dragged himself down to the kitchen, he became aware that there was some kind of sadness in the air.

June quickly said to her husband, Guy, "Shhhh, we'll talk about it later. Poor Marion. I'll go see her this afternoon..."

His father nodded, eyeing his son as he entered the kitchen.

* * *

At four-years of age and after attending pre-school, Davey considered himself quite grown-up. He already knew his ABC's and could count to twelve, even though he had only ten fingers.

“It’s almost the Fourth of July, my little man.” His mother always called him that. Why... he didn’t know, besides, who ever saw a man who was actually little?

He smiled up at her with a question in his eyes, all the while making a mess with his cereal.

“Fourth of July, Davey! Picnic at the park, fireworks, clowns, parade....”

For whatever reason, a slight shiver rippled through his body. Picnic, clowns... Davey shook it off and grinned broadly again at his mother.

“Just two more days, Davey, then we go to the park and have all kinds of *fun!*” The last word was emphasized like it was some kind of *extra-special fun*, but Davey wasn’t so sure about that.

He poked his stubby fingers up and counted, “One, two.”

“Right you are, Little Man!” June embraced her son and he felt the love flow from her heart into his.

Before long, it was the usual bustle as the barbecue smoke filled the air, people laughed, others played ball, and children dashed everywhere. One of Davey’s classmates glued himself to his side, being a shy boy and a bit younger than him.

“C’mon, Wilson! Go play somewhere else,” he urged the new boy, “Maybe over there, with those girls!” He was partly teasing the boy and partly meaning what he said. Wilson hung his head as a small tear escaped from beneath his long lashes. Then Davey felt sorry and relented. They both headed for the swings.

After the mustard and ketchup face-smearing contest, it was time to wander over to edge of the street and await the first entry in the parade to pass by. Again, it was the clown act.

Not remembering his reaction to them from the year before, Davey’s eyes glinted with joy watching the antics of the colorful clowns as they rode their small cycles and cars.

“One, two, three, four, five,” he counted on his raised fingers. “There are five of them, Mommy, Daddy!”

Then Davey let out a sudden gasp of fright, as one of the tricycling clowns came too close to him. Davey stumbled backward to hide behind his mother’s legs not realizing he’d done the exact same thing the year before.

His mother smiled down upon his head and said, “What are you hiding for, Davey? You’re not scared of him, are you?”

“No, Momma, not scared!” He lifted his eyes and stared boldly at the clown face in front of him. At that moment, the entertainer swung around and continued down the curb, seeking another little one to terrorize, all in the name of fun, of course.

As Davey watched, craning his neck sideways, he spotted Wilson down the line, standing next to his own parents. Wilson was laughing and laughing, like he would never stop. Then, he extended his small hand out to touch the clown’s face.

Don’t! Don’t do that, Wilson! Don’t touch him! Davey had no idea why he thought that way and how much he wanted to yell those words out loud, but at the same time, he knew how stupid they would sound to everyone around him, so he held back.

Davey gasped again, watching the scene unfold, as if it were in slow motion. Wilson just barely swept his chubby hand over the painted cheek of the grinning clown, when he jerked it back like he’d come into contact with a hot, burning coal. He hid his fist under one arm and giggled uncertainly. The rider on the small bike continued on his wobbly way.

Then the moment passed. When everything returned to normal, Davey let out his breath, again. *Whew!*, he thought. *That was strange.* Davey went to play and forgot about the little performance with the clown.

“What? WHAT?” June was on the phone in the kitchen the following day, her eyes wide as she listened to the person on the other end. Her husband shot her an inquisitive look, to which she waved him off and laid one finger across her lips to silence any questions he might utter.

“No. I can’t believe it! That poor, little boy. Why, he’s in the same class as…” June stopped speaking when she realized her son had wandered into the room.

She sat heavily on a nearby stool and said softly, “Do you mind if I call you back in a bit? I have to fix something for the boys to eat…” She waited a moment. “Okay. Later then.”

“I want Cheerios!” Davey said.

“What’s the magic word?” asked his Dad with a half-frown on his face.

“Abracadabra!” his son shot back, then playfully ran around the table before his father could swat his behind.

With a twinkle in his eye, Davey sat down and said, “Okay, *puleeze* may I have Cheerios for breakfast?”

“That’s better, son.”

Half way through the bowl of cereal, Davey noticed that his parents weren’t eating anything. They only sipped on their cups of black coffee. Davey’s eyes moved back and forth from face to face, wondering what was wrong, why is something different this morning? It was like they were waiting for something. He continued to watch them warily, until he finished the last spoonful.

“Can I go out and play with Slingshot, now?” he asked. “Maybe he needs to take a walk.”

“Okay, Davey, but you know the rule - only to the end of the block and back again.” Both parents watched him walk slowly out the kitchen door. It made him feel weird. He snatched the leash off the hook on the porch and stepped into the yard.

Once out of their sight, he called, “Here, Slingshot, here boy!”, then slid down the outside wall until he was just within hearing range of the kitchen.

“What’ll we do? How shall we tell Davey about this...? June began.

“About what? You haven’t even clued me in on whatever it is, yet!” said Guy.

“Oh, I’m sorry! That was my friend down the street, Amy Witherton. She said that the little Royle boy, Wilson--you know the one from Davey’s pre-school class?-- went missing overnight. They can’t find him anywhere! I didn’t want to say anything in front of Davey quite yet. I’m hoping he’ll be found and we won’t have to!”

Guy watched as the worry lines scrunched up his wife’s pretty forehead.

“I think I’ll go and volunteer for the search. Okay with you, Hon?” Guy stated.

“Yes. That’s a very good idea. They’re congregating at the Royle’s place on the next block...1410 Paar Avenue.”

Guy grabbed his lightweight jacket and left through the front door. He gazed back at June and whispered, “I just hope I don’t run into our son along the way.”

* * *

Still sitting outside the back door, Davey wondered what they meant by “missing”. Then it hit him, like a lightning bolt out of the clear blue sky, so then he got up and ran inside.

“Mommy!”

June, startled at the sound of her son’s urgent voice, dropped the dish she’d been washing while staring out the window over the kitchen sink.

“My gosh, Davey! You gave your mother quite a scare there.” She knelt down to his level and looked directly into his worried blue eyes. “What’s wrong, Little Man?”

“It got him! It got Wilson!” His words ended in a sob.

As she hugged him close, June asked, “What? What got Wilson?”

“The clown, the clown in the parade, the clown in the parade...you remember, you remember... he touched his face, even when I begged him not to, begged him not to...” More sobs racked his slight body, so June held him even tighter.

“Shhhhhh, there, Son. There Son, Shhhhhh,” she murmured, over and over until his sobs subsided and only occasional whimpers emitted from his mouth, then ended in him developing the hiccups.

When Davey stood back from her, he wiped his tears away with the back of his hand. His moist eyes pleaded with his mother to understand.

“It’s the clown, Mommy. That scary clown, with the pretend smile on his face. I think he stole Wilson....” His eyes looked deeper and deeper into June’s, which she found unsettling.

“Davey, Davey...clowns do not steal people! They make them laugh.”

“This one does! He steals kids! His face doesn’t laugh - or his eyes either!”

“Well, your father went to help search for Wilson and I’m sure they will find him. You just wait and see. Okay, Honey?” She clutched her son’s trembling form and held him close, again. Then she whispered in his ear, “*It’s just a your imagination.*”

Davey realized that no one would believe his explanation of how his friend Wilson became missing. He even thought about going over and telling the boy’s parents, but just as quickly, changed his mind. They wouldn’t believe him, anyway. He hugged himself when he went to bed that night and said a prayer for Wilson. Wherever he might be.

Wilson Royle was never found.

The following year, being a year older did not lessen Davey’s fear of the clowns. If anything, it was worse. It was a dread that washed through him and settled deep inside his flesh and bones.

Once again, his begging did no good. He wondered if he absolutely refused to go, would his parents hog-tie him and take him to the park anyway? Reluctantly, he went along quietly, not wanting to find out the answer.

This year he and his new friend, Timmy, were the ones who ran wild together during the *Big Wig's* speeches. They ate lots of watermelon, whose juice ran in rivulets down their giggling faces. They teeter-tottered, climbed the monkey bars, and went down the slide together. All in all, it was a glorious day filled with fun. Until...

"Mommy, Daddy, don't make me watch the clowns this time, okay?" Davey's hopeful eyes peered up at them over the edge of the picnic table.

"Now, son, don't be silly," his dad said, "Clowns won't hurt you." He said as he ruffled Davey's sandy hair and smiled comfortingly.

"C'mon, let's go!" His mother took his small hand in hers and exerted a little pressure, as she pulled him along toward the edge of the sidewalk. Timmy ran to find his own family.

This time, Davey jerked his hand from his mother's grip and took off running the moment he saw the clowns approaching in the distance. Both his parents ran after him. June reached him first. She grabbed him up around his slim little waist and started walking back with him tucked under her arm like a sack of potatoes.

"Little Man, you stand still right here!" she ordered as she sat him down beside her. He squeezed his eyes shut so tightly, the world went black and he nearly fainted. But he'd make it through that year...somehow.

Long after the brightly colored figures on their silly cars and trykes had passed, Davey finally dared to open his eyes and glare down the street at them.

"One, two, three, four..." He counted below his breath.

He pulled on his mother's shirt and said aloud, "Mommy, there are only four of them now..."

"What, Son?"

"Only four clowns now!"

"Uh-huh," she said and went back to her conversation with her neighbor.

The morning after the day of the clowns, Davey kept glancing at the white phone where it hung on the kitchen wall. *It's going to ring any minute now*, he thought, while shoveling spoonfuls of Honeynut Cheerios into his mouth, milk dripping down his chin. *Any minute now it will ring with news of another kid missing and we will know for sure that the clowns stole another one. Any minute now...*

"Davey, why do you keep glancing over at the phone? Is everything okay with you this morning? Are you are expecting one of your friends to call you...?" His father stared at him from across the small table.

"Um, no," he answered, as he took a large bite of his toast, followed by a gulp of cocoa.

Three days passed and the phone never rang with bad news about anybody, so Davey began to feel more at ease— *okay, they're right and I am wrong. Clowns don't steal kids after all*. He sighed with relief and went about the business of enjoying the summer.

On the fourth day, Davey came into the kitchen and immediately knew something bad had happened. The Daily News was spread out on the kitchen table with both parents hunched over it, reading together.

"Oh my God! Oh, those poor people! She lived clear cross town." They went on and on, not noticing their son standing in the doorway with a scared look on his now pale, white face.

"Her father works on the loading dock, but I never got to know him." Just then, Guy stood up straight and met his son's eyes from across the room.

In a hoarse voice, barely audible, Davey asked, “Were they at the picnic?”

June swung around, surprised to hear such fear in her son’s voice.

“Davey! I didn’t know you came downstairs. Sit and I’ll make you breakfast.” June tried unsuccessfully to smile and act normal, like it was any other day.

“I don’t want breakfast. I want to know if the girl was at the picnic!”

“That’s no way to speak to your mother, Davey!” His father shot him a stern look. “Now, sit!”

Davey did as he was told. Then he muttered, “Clown got her, too.”

“I do wish you would stop going on and on about those clowns, Davey,” June said as she prepared his breakfast. “Besides, we don’t know if the family attended the annual picnic or not.”

“Bet they did! Bet the clown got her!”

“Hush now, Honey. Enough about the darn clowns!” June placed a plate of scrambled eggs in front of him.

“It’s your imagination running away with you, son. Like when you complained about being upstairs alone and you dreamed about ghosts and goblins coming up the stairs to ‘get’ you. You know it’s not possible...right, Davey?”

“Right, Dad.” Davey figured it’d be best to agree with them. They will never, in a million years, believe him on *this* subject.

“Just one thing, though - I bet *next* year there will only be *three clowns* in the parade!” He began stuffing his mouth full of the scrambled eggs.

Out of his sightline, June and Guy rolled their eyes to the heavens, their exasperation plainly evident upon their faces.

The whole family attended the little girl's funeral the next day along with the rest of the company and their families. Davey could not stop shivering, as he walked by the casket.

It got her, it got her, it got her....only this time it killed her... he thought and wouldn't look at the dead girl's body as the family passed by. June held tightly onto her small son's shoulders. Sadness and tears filled every corner of the room.

When fall finally arrived, school began as usual. However, Davey became increasingly quiet and withdrawn. Now in the second grade, his teachers became worried about him, but decided it was just a phase he was going through. His schoolwork didn't suffer, so they left him alone.

Christmas came and went. Spring drifted by just like the robins in the front yard, as they fluttered from tree to bush. Crows squawked at Davey, who sat morosely on the bench on the front porch of his home. Slingshot brought sticks, but Davey wouldn't play fetch with him, the way he always did.

March, April, May, June...

I won't go this time! I just won't! he promised himself, while he sat, arms crossed firmly across his chest. His stubborn chin stuck out like an exclamation point.

Yet once again, Davey was dragged to the car, to the park, but that's as far as he would go, even if he had to dig his heels into the ground.

While his dad played softball with the other men, Davey pleaded with his mother.

"Please, Mommy, don't make me watch the clowns this year. *Please!*"

"Now, my Little Man, it won't kill you to watch the parade for a little while, at least. Then you and Slingshot can go play. Okay?"

He knew he couldn't ask for any more than that and so shrugged his tiny shoulders.

As always, he got through the speeches and the picnic without trembling *too* much.

He held tightly to Slingshot's leash as his mom and dad walked him by the hand over to the sidewalk curbing .

Okay, he told himself, Be brave. Be brave. They're only men dressed up in stupid ol' clown suits. They can't hurt you. There are people all around. He wouldn't dare...

Then they came wobbling on their little trikes, waving at the people, painted on red smiles, spread across white faces. Green hair, yellow hair, red hair. Three clowns.

Beneath his breath, Davey whispered, *"Three. I wonder if it's my turn yet."*

"What did you say, Son?" June tilted her head down toward his quaking form.

"I said, there are only three clowns this year. You remember when I told you there would only be three?" He clutched his dog's leash as if his life depended on it.

June looked toward her husband and said, "He's right, Hon. There are only three clowns now. Last year there were four, the year before that- five, before that-six..."

"Coincidence. That's all it is," Guy said.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right..." June answered. Davey's eyes pleaded with her to believe him, believe there exists a connection between the clowns and the missing children, one missing, one of them dead!

The colorful clown trio grew closer. Then, Slingshot began to shiver, too, and it was all Davey could do to hold onto him. When a green-haired clown wobbled toward them, Davey took a step back, like he always did. Suddenly, his dog let out a loud yelp, jerked the leash from his master's small hand and scurried off as fast as his legs would allow. He disappeared into the brush in back of the ball field.

Davey started to follow, but his mom grabbed hold of his collar and said, "Stay here, Little Man, Slingshot will be okay. The clown just spooked him, that's all."

But Davey detected the worried sound in her voice and the frown that wrinkled up her forehead.

“See, Momma, Slingshot is scared of them, too!” His bottom lip protruded outward. *So stubborn – Just like his father...* June thought.

Frozen to his spot and unable to move now, Davey had to stand and watch the antics of these dreaded performers. *I wonder who it will touch this time...?*

“Mommy?”

“Yes, Son?”

“Watch and see who that clown touches this year and you’ll see who disappears next. *Please?*”

June said, “I’ll do that, Davey. Just for you, I’ll do that...”

He slipped his small hand in hers and squeezed with all his might. Now he felt that he had someone on his side.

They watched carefully as the performers criss-crossed the road, back and forth, making the small children laugh and clap their pudgy, little hands. Then, the clowns did something they’d never done before. They began handing out colorfully wrapped lollipops to the crowd. Especially, to the youngest children.

Davey watched, growing more frantic with each passing moment. *Oh, no! They are touching lots of kids! Now we’ll have no way of knowing who’s next!*

The yellow-haired clown paused for a few seconds longer before a tiny, curly-mopped boy. Then the clown tousled the boy’s hair before handing him the candy and then pedaled crazily on his way.

Davey felt a shudder pass down his spine.

“He’s the one, Mommy, he’s the one! Do you know who that boy is? The one the clown touched? ...on his head..?” His voice was full of excitement and fear, all at the same time.

“No, I don’t, Son. And I really don’t think...”

Davey pulled his hand out from hers and ran to find Slingshot. *She didn’t believe me! Not for a minute!* He was about in tears when he found Slingshot huddled beneath a tall maple tree.

As he hugged his dog fiercely, more tears began to fall down his cheeks, and he and Slingshot shivered together.

A few minutes later, Guy found them and said sternly, “C’mon, Davey.” He knew he was in trouble because his dad only called him *Davey*, in that tone of voice, when he was angry.

“Get a move on and no more funny business! Grow up, Son! Why should we have to pound it into your thick skull that clowns are here to entertain us, not to scare us? Take your dog and we’ll head for home.”

Davey knew when to keep his thoughts to himself - knew when his Dad had his mind made up and there would be no further argument.

Two days later, the headlines read “ANOTHER MISSING CHILD”. It went on to name the boy under a photo, the boy whose hair the clown had tousled at the parade. Davey didn’t say a word, though his mother glanced at him with a question in her eyes. Thinking no one will ever believe him, he lowered his head and passed by his parents to go outside and play with his only friend in this world, Slingshot.

Why can’t anyone believe me? It’s so plain to see. So why don’t they want to see the truth, the plain-as-the-nose-on-your-face, God-awful TRUTH!

The year passed by slowly. School and friends filled up the time. Winter was fun. It snowed that year which meant lots of sledding, building forts, and throwing snowballs. It was over too

soon. March turned to April, April to May. June passed. Then...July Fourth....The Day of the Clowns!

Davey didn't even beg to stay home this time. What was the use?

Two clowns. Who would it be this time? Is it his turn yet- to go off to Clown Land, or wherever they take the little boys and girls? And where is it? What sort of torture goes on there? He shivered as he stood next to his mother alongside the parade route.

Once more, the brightly colored clowns- one yellow, one dressed in green- passed out candy. Some they tossed into the crowd, some they handed out personally. Once again, Davey took a step back when they neared him and his parents. The green-haired clown glared at him with dead slate-black eyes, then passed on to another family. It touched a boy from his class. Timothy, somebody or other.

Letting himself breathe again, Davey was glad he got through another year. But not glad that it meant another boy would be taken.

"It will be Timothy from my class this time, Mom." He didn't want to be right - but he was.

"H-hmmmm," June barely heard him as she busily cooked breakfast. She had been listening closely to the local news and trying to hear Guy explain something to her, at the same time.

"Next year there will be only one clown. Only one."

His dad heard his mumbled words this time.

"When will you grow up? Davey, I've told you and told you. Now, no more clown talk! Have you got that straight?"

"Yes, Dad. I've got it." As he ran from the room, he made a parting shot, "Watch next year. There will be only one clown! And maybe *this* time it will take me!" He disappeared outside so fast that his dad didn't have time to retort.

The summer passed. Fall fell. Same old, same old, with one bright exception - Mom and Dad announced they were going to have a new baby! It was going to be great! Davey decided he would love being an older brother.

“What do you want, Little Man, a sister or a brother?”

He shrugged and said, “It don’t matter. I will love either one.”

“That’s my boy!” Guy interrupted him, “So grown up now!”

Davey stuck out his chest and felt good at the praise.

He watched as his mother’s belly grew and grew. It looked like a large basketball filling her up! He smiled at the thought.

“When? When? When will the baby come out?”

“My goodness! So eager, aren’t we? Actually, Doc Maynard said it will be sooner than we expected. Probably by early June.”

“Wow!” Davey could hardly wait.

June first was the day his little sister Abby arrived. When she was brought home, Davey couldn’t stop staring at her. *Wow! A real live, little person came out of his mamma’s belly. It was a miracle!* Suddenly, Davey felt very protective of his baby sister and thought, *maybe I am growing up!*

* * *

Now, though, as Davey stood watching the street from his upstairs window, he thought *I am not going to the picnic this year. ‘Cause if I do, the last clown will get me! It will get me for sure!*

Davey marched downstairs and into the kitchen where his parents were getting Abby ready for her first picnic, then announced, “I’m not going this time. I’m nine now and I have to make some decisions for myself!”

June and Guy swung their heads in his direction.

His dad said, “All right, Son. This year, you’re off the hook!”

A smile of disbelief spread across Davey’s face.

Guy went on to say, “We’ll be busy showing off our new bundle of joy anyway, won’t we, June?”

“Now Guy, stop trying to make Davey jealous...”

“I’m not jealous one bit!” he said. *Just glad to stay home, miss this picnic...*

His parents and baby sister went out the door and then he heard the car drive away.

Whew! Saved! Davey got busy. He mowed the front lawn, clipped some hedges and low bushes, thought about straightening up the garage, but that was *too* much work, so he settled in the living room to watch some television, complete with some popcorn and pop.

Good!...Wrestling is on.

Davey’s parents came back around six o’clock, all happy and sun-tanned. Luckily, they brought home some hotdogs and potato salad for a light dinner. Davey was starving and so he dove into the food with enthusiasm.

After Abby was put to bed and Davey had brushed his teeth, his mom came in to say good night.

Davey looked at her reflection through the mirror and asked, “Was there only one clown?”

June nodded, “Yes. One clown,” she barely whispered.

“Did it touch anyone, a kid?”

“I didn’t watch! I couldn’t watch!” She turned swiftly and headed downstairs.

Before hopping into bed, Davey did his usual thing; he spread the sheer curtains apart and looked down. There - across the street - a clown!

In the dim light from the streetlamp, he couldn’t quite make out which color he was, but guessed he was in green. The clown moved further into the light. Yes, it *was* the green frilled clown with the same colored curly wig!

Fear clutched at his heart, as an invisible hand squeezed it and constricted his throat. He couldn’t make a sound, couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t tear his eyes away from the figure, half-hidden in shadows.

As he was about to pass out from lack of oxygen, the clown gave a little wave with a white-gloved hand, then disappeared.

Davey slid down to the floor, grabbing hold of the windowsill to prevent hurting himself, and fought for his breath. Large gasps emitted from his mouth, as tears flowed freely. Sweat bathed his pajamas, and soon he was soaking wet.

Davey crawled across the floor, pulled himself up to slip between cool, soothing sheets of his single bed. There he huddled, clutching rough blankets around him and shivered, until the grayness of morning filtered in through the filmy curtains of the window.

“Davey, is something wrong?” his mother asked when Davey came downstairs. “You look like you haven’t slept at all!” She felt his forehead for some indication.

“You don’t have a fever...”

Just then Guy entered the kitchen.

Switching his eyes between the two faces, concern furrowed his brow.

“Is something wrong? Davey, you don’t look so hot. Are you sick?”

Davey pounced on this explanation. “Yeah, I don’t feel good.”

“Well, you just stay home and take care of yourself, okay Son?”

“Yes, I will, Dad.”

After his dad left for the day, Davey gathered up enough nerve to finally say something to his mother. He took in a deep breath and said, “Mom, I saw a clown last night...across the street. I looked out my window, like I always do and he was out there; across the street! He’s waiting for me! Waiting for me ‘cause I didn’t go to the parade this time!” A deep sob escaped his throat.

“Oh, Son!” June hugged him tightly for a few minutes, then drew back to look him directly in the face.

“Honey, you simply had a bad dream last night. You were thinking of how you got out of seeing the clown this year and so now your subconscious built on it, making for a very scary, unreal dream. Do you understand?”

“But Mommy, he *was* real! As real as you are - standing right here in front of me!” His eyes filled with more tears.

June hugged him again and said, “I know how nightmares can seem so real to us, but I assure you, there was no clown outside your window last night. Okay?”

Davey gulped, swallowed the lump in his throat, and nodded. He wiped the remaining tears from his cheeks with the back of his hand. She had convinced him.

No clown outside! Just a terrible nightmare.

That night, Davey’s parents appeared concerned about his little sister.

He heard his mother say, “She has a slight fever, but it’s not high enough to worry about...yet.”

Guy said, “If she’s not better by morning, we’ll check with Doc, okay?”

“Sounds like a plan,” June answered.

Then they all retired for the night.

No, no! I will not look out my window tonight. I will not! ‘Cause there is no clown out there.

No clown! Davey said over and over again, to himself.

After several minutes of shivering between cold sheets, he was somehow soaked in sweat, anyway. Although he sat there with eyes squeezed shut, Davey ultimately gave in to the overwhelming urge to look! Just a quick peek, to reassure himself. *There’s no clown outside.*

Mommy said so!

Slowly, reluctantly, he drew the flimsy curtains aside and gazed across the street. *It’s there!* He could no longer convince himself that it is a man dressed in a clown suit. It stood directly beneath the streetlight this time, so Davey could get a real good look at it. White baggy suit with green ruffles, green curly mop on its head. It was staring upward at him, grinning - evil written all over his face. Davey shivered as fear trickled down his spine.

Just as before - he couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe! He figured he was going to die - right there at the window, staring down at the street where the apparition of the clown stood.

A bad dream, his mother said. Nothing but a bad dream, the kind where your legs won’t move... or anything else for that matter. *GONNA DIE RIGHT HERE!*

Trying to swallow the huge lump stuck in his throat, Davey watched as the clown moved its arm as if it was beckoning to him, its arm making large arcs, urging him to come to it! Over and over, beckoning, beckoning... Davey watched until finally, it stopped, glared up at the frightened small boy in the window, and swirled around into a sudden gathering mist and disappeared.

Another sleepless night for Davey.

“You still don’t look very well, Davey,” his dad remarked, when Davey finally dragged himself downstairs the next morning.

“I’ll make you some tea and toast, Son. You stay home and get some rest. We’re taking Abby to the doctor’s right now. She has a fever and is not well, at all. She threw up this morning,” his mother added.

Davey nodded in agreement. He didn’t want to worry them any more than they already were. Maybe he would mention the nightmare of the clown again to his mom, later in the day. Then again...maybe not.

It was still so real to him, that he couldn’t shake the apparition from his fuzzy mind. After they left, Davey curled up with a blanket on the living room couch, in front of the television and dozed off immediately.

He slept fitfully, thrashing and yelling aloud in his sleep, until the loud jangle of the phone woke him up. He mumbled, “Wha-?”

The phone. Okay. He crawled to the end of the couch and lifted the receiver.

“Hello,” he croaked. Cleared his throat and said a little louder, “Hello?”

It was his mom. “Son, we will be home later. They are admitting Abby. They think she may have the flu or something and want to keep her overnight to keep an eye on her.”

“Okay, Mom” Davey yawned loudly.

“I’m sorry if I woke you, Honey,”

“S’okay,” he replied.

“If you’re hungry, just snoop in the fridge, or open up a can of soup from the pantry,” June sounded anxious.

“Okay, Mom. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine,” he said with false bravado. “Just take care of Abby. Kiss her for me.”

“Okay, Son. Love you.”

“I love you too, Mom,” he whispered, then hung up the phone.

Why did he feel so scared? He’d been home alone lots of times.

Davey scrambled into the kitchen and looked for something to eat. He satisfied himself by preparing some chicken noodle soup and a Spam sandwich, with a glass of milk that rounded off his dinner.

He thought, *More television, something stupid that would be funny.- take his mind off...* He munched away. This was the only time he could get away with eating in the living room, as there was no one there to yell at him for it.

It was now after dark - past eight o’clock and they weren’t home yet! *Come home! Come home! I can’t take it here all by myself! Not when there is a green clown waiting for me outside! Please, please!*

He just about leapt out of his skin when the phone rang again. He raced for it, nearly dropping it as he frantically held it to his ear.

“I thought I’d better call so you won’t worry about us, Davey,” his mom said. “Are you okay, did you eat something?”

“Yes, Mom. When will you be home?” He practically yelled the words, got hold of himself and said more calmly, “Are you coming home soon? I don’t like it here by myself.”

“Yes, Davey, we will be home soon, but they’ll be keeping Abby. Her fever has not gone down, as yet. I thought perhaps we might stay overnight with her, if it’s okay with you..? Mrs. James, from next door, could look in on you from time to time.”

“NO! I mean, no, please come home.” He felt like such a baby, begging her like this, but he really couldn’t take another minute living with such deep, wrenching fear.

“I understand, Davey. Bad dreams again? We’re on our way.”

He let out such a huge breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding, until she agreed to return home to him. Mom understands - sort of.

After his parents arrived back home and had gone to bed, Davey did his best to resist the urge to gaze out the window; where he knew the clown waited for him. *Not a dream, Mom, not a nightmare!* He pinched himself on his arm. *Ouch! I am wide-awake, not in bed, not dreaming.*

He pulled the curtains aside.

Davey started to cry out, but managed to cover his mouth with his hands, hands that trembled so violently, it’s a wonder they obeyed his command. The green clown stood closer this time, still beckoning him, over and over, its wicked red grin spreading threateningly over its ghoulish white face. It took a few more steps, with its large floppy shoes slapping on the pavement of the street. Closer...closer.

Get away! Go away! No matter what you do, I’m not coming out! I won’t go with you!

In the center of the street, the clown stopped. It wiggled a finger at him like a warning, or something sinister he planned for him. It turned, and like before, left in a whirl of fog - no longer there. The empty street gaped blankly at him, seeming to wait - and wait.

Davey felt like his life was about to shatter around him, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it! He didn’t mean to curse, but this was a special occasion. He turned and quickly crawled deep into the covers of his bed, where he shivered uncontrollably. He was so drained of energy that he finally fell asleep toward morning, just when his mother poked her head into his room.

“Hey, Sleepyhead, we’re off to the hospital. You sleep some more and I’ll call you soon with some news. Don’t worry. We won’t be gone all day, this time.”

Davey tried valiantly to rise, but felt too weak. He wanted to say that he’d get up, get dressed, and go with them, but couldn’t. His sleepless nights were catching up to him, draining all his strength.

He slumped back down. “Okay, Mom. See you later…”

He heard her voice as it trailed off, “I don’t know what’s wrong with these doctors, Guy! They say there is no earthly reason for Abby’s illness. She just gets worse and worse. What will we do if we lose her?”

He fell asleep at once; didn’t even hear the door close.

It was mid-afternoon when the ringing of the phone clanged through a dream in which he roamed the hallways of the hospital, trying to find the room where his little sister lay ill. In his dream, Abby was on her deathbed. His heart was trying to beat its way out of his rib cage and his legs were so rubbery, he could barely stand. He clung to the walls as he teetered this way and that.

Brrrrriinnnnngggg, went the phone again.

“Okay, okay!” Davey shook the sleep from his mind and rose to answer the phone.

He grumped all the way down the stairs to the phone in the kitchen.

“Hello? That you, Mom? When are you coming home? How’s Abby?”

A small nervous voice said, “I’m not your Mom.”

“Who are you then?”

“Timothy.”

“Timothy, who? I don’t know any Timothy.” Davey was still trying to shake off cobwebs of sleep and was not truly awake yet.

“Timothy. You know, from your class...?”

Suddenly Davey was wide-awake. “But you’re missing! Or dead. Or something! Where are you?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

Davey detected fear, or dread, in the boy’s voice.

Timothy went on, “He wants you to come out to him...NOW!” A sob broke through Timothy’s weak voice. He sounded so far away.

“I won’t! Tell him that!”

Silence echoed through the phone lines creating an eerie quiet.

Timothy came back on line. “He says that if you don’t come out now and come to him, he will be forced to go to the hospital and take your little sister, instead.”

“What? What? No! He can’t do that! Not my baby sister!” Davey yelled.

“Then come out.” As Timothy’s voice was growing faint, his words seemed to echo inside Davey’s head...*Come out...come out...*

Davey, now filled with complete terror, stood immobile, like a stone statue, unable to move. Weak-kneed, he slid to the floor.

“Hurry up! You don’t have much time! He says he is going to the hospital for little Abby-right now!” Another sob escaped the boy’s mouth.

Davey heard his father’s voice speaking somewhere in his head, “Grow up, Son, act like a man!” Then, he imagined his mother’s voice, “My Little Man.”

“...no earthly reason for her illness..” also played over and over in his mind.

“Okay, Dad,” Davey whispered. *For you and for Mom, for Abby..*

Davey Mansfield rose up from the floor where he’d been sitting, unaware of how he got there, and walked robotically to the back door, knowing that the clown would be out there waiting for him. He turned the knob; opened the door, slowly and reluctantly, then stumbled across the porch, out into the yard.

Slingshot pulled furiously at the bottom of his pajama pants, trying to stop him, but soon ceased, perhaps realizing it was no use. The dog retreated underneath the back porch, whimpered then began a mournful howl.

Then, from out of the shadows just beneath the shade of the maple tree in the corner of the yard, Davey saw him. He was transfixed within the power of the dead slate eyes. Davey turned, then walked toward it. The clown held out one of his white gloved hands that revealed only three bulging fingers.

Obediently, Davey took that hand in his and the two of them disappeared into the thick, icy fog.